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Kathleen Wynne's controversies are a weight on Trudeau's Liberals

June 5, 2015

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While the federal NDP benefit from the stunning rise of the Alberta left, the Grits may be hampered by their Ontario counterpart

The 2015 federal election will require political parties to work harder than ever to capture the attention of the electorate. This story is part of Adam Radwanski's new assignment looking at how the party machines across the country are preparing.

Among the many blessings for Thomas Mulcair's New Democrats, in the stunning rise to power of Rachel Notley, is that there may not be enough time before this fall's federal election for buyers' remorse to set in.

Among the many challenges for Justin Trudeau's Liberals is that the same can't be said for Kathleen Wynne.

No matter how successful they prove in the long run, governments have a tendency to annoy voters early in their terms, as they get uncomfortable or controversial things out of the way. And while they have time to get their game faces on before seeking re-election, parties that share their brand and have to go to the polls sooner can suffer.

While Ms. Notley is still basking in the excitement of Alberta's first change in government in more than four decades, Ontario's Ms. Wynne is providing a case study in the early-term ebb.

She generated some excitement of her own, as an accessible and urbane contrast to her (fellow Liberal) predecessor Dalton McGuinty, after she won her party's leadership in 2013.

But amid a series of controversies, around everything from hydro privatization to sex education to the alleged strong-arming of a would-be Liberal by-election candidate, the honeymoon has come to an end since she won back majority government a year ago.

A poll provided to The Globe and Mail helps tell that story. When Innovative Research Group surveyed 606 voting-age Ontarians last month through land lines and cellphones, only 33 per cent expressed a favourable view of Ms. Wynne, next to 41 per cent who expressed an unfavourable one; before last year's election, the same pollster had her at 44-per-cent favourable and 34-per-cent unfavourable.

Members of Mr. Trudeau's campaign insist they don't want to use Ms. Wynne as an excuse if things don't go their way in Ontario, and point out the impact of provincial dynamics on federal races is often exaggerated.

But they concede their candidates are coming back from canvasses complaining about their provincial cousins

being a drag on them.

While most people with strongly negative views on Ms. Wynne probably wouldn't vote Liberal regardless, a few groups of target voters in Ontario battlegrounds stand out.

The one that has received the most media attention is voters in some suburban immigrant communities who take issue with Ontario's new sex-ed curriculum. Until recently, federal Liberals were complaining that Liberal MPPs weren't doing enough to push back against misconceptions about what kids will be taught, leaving them to take the heat; they now seem to think the province is communicating better on it, including through a new ad campaign.

But while federal Conservatives have been mostly treading lightly on this issue, some of *their* provincial cousins have been helping keep it alive.

No less significant are left-of-centre voters, notably in downtown Toronto, who were successfully courted away from the NDP by Ms. Wynne last provincial campaign. Particularly because of her subsequent decision to privatize the provincial energy utility Hydro One, which federal Liberals concede is another sore point at the doors, some now feel they were sold a bill of goods and might consequently be more inclined to stick with Mr. Mulcair's party.

Then there are voters in Southwestern Ontario ridings, held by Conservative MPs, who might be in the mood for change because of their region's economic problems but have developed deep-seated hostility toward the Liberal brand.

That dates back to Mr. McGuinty's time in office, but the current prominence of Hydro One is a reminder of energy policies that rank high among their grievances.

None of this will be enough for Mr. Trudeau to completely distance himself from Ms. Wynne. On the contrary, he has good reason to maintain a close relationship.

Scrambling to rebuild their organization after being virtually wiped out in the last federal election, his Liberals can use all the on-the-ground help they can get from a provincial party that holds the majority of seats.

But while Ms. Wynne is by all accounts still eager to help them out, the federal Liberals' fortunes are hardly her top concern. Unfortunately for Mr. Trudeau, his electoral calendar is at odds with hers.

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